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ABSTRACT

This speech traces the evolution of accountability, defines accountability, and examines alternative approaches to accountability. The author conceptualizes educational accountability in operational terms as a system for improving the delivery of educational outcomes that would clarify who is answerable to whom, for what, then, and within what constraints. A comprehensive accountability strategy for established institutions is suggested to include identification and clarification of objectives, creation of an accountability team, development of output-oriented management systems, implementation of outcomes-oriented instructional systems, greater utilization of instructional resources in the private sector, continuing the search for and experimentation with alternative public school programs, creation of an educational auditing approach, design and operation of a total evaluation system, and more effective reporting on school achievement. The author examines the issues of alternative or "free" schools outside the established system, supported through vouchers. The nature of educational legislation on accountability is also summarized. (Author/DN)

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SPEAKER: Stephen J. Knezevich, Professor of Educational Administration, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

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ED 087119

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The passing fancy disappears before a year is out. The durability of educational accountability since its rebirth shortly before 1970 attests to the fact that it is no passing fancy. The drive to make the nation's educational system more accountable to learners and the public in general is increasing, not lessening, in intensity. Escalating costs in the face of declining enrollments, increasing expectations for the educational system, and greater sensitivity to the shortcomings of the established schools are only a few of the social, political, and economic forces fueling the demands for greater educational accountability during the rest of this decade.

What's more, this is the concept that dethroned relevance as the most popular term in the lexicon of writers, speakers, and legislators concerned about education. Relevance generated considerable emotional fervor that was idealistic in flavor and appealed primarily to romantics. It was difficult to get a handle on this elusive concept. There is a strong emotional current which surrounds accountability as well. Nonetheless, the concept projects a more pragmatic image. This can be documented by the fact that there is accountability legislation on the books in a majority of states as well as many ongoing programs. It must be added, however, that relevance may be viewed as one important dimension of accountability. Accountability may be perceived as one mechanism for reinforcing the concern for continuing relevance of the educational opportunities provided in the nation's schools.

Evolution of Accountability

Accountability is a great hope that never dies; it merely remains beneath the threshold of attention for various periods of time. It has been rekindled and to some extent, redefined in recent years, and, therefore, is once again in the limelight. The Bible records the Apostle Paul's words that "everyone of us shall give account of himself to God." There are references to it in the history of secular institutions as well. Over 325 years ago (1647) the "old Deluder Law" held each town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony accountable for establishing schools to teach each child to read and to write. It was to be enforced by a fine levied on the recalcitrant towns.

Early in this century accountability implied that money raised for a stated purpose was to be allocated only to the legally declared purpose and not switched to others, however worthy. Limitations and safeguards on the use of educational resources necessitated the design of a fiscal accountability system for schools. The life style of educational administrators was changed with the advent of budgets, financial accounts, fiscal auditing and financial reporting. It demonstrated that professional school administrators could and would implement a battery of special mechanisms to satisfy the earlier demands for greater accountability for schools.

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The concept of accountability continues to evolve and school administrators, as well as others, are asked to confront a new set of challenges. Who is to be held accountable and for what has changed over time. The historic or traditional perceptions are not what make educational accountability the emotionally charged and demanding concept that it is today. The emphasis is no longer on simply safeguarding inputs for assigned uses through an accounting system. What fires the popular imagination is the desire to improve the quantity and quality of educational outcomes and in so doing to strike a more favorable relationship between resources consumed in the educational process and results obtained from it. It has evolved into a more comprehensive concept which encompasses the goals, program strategies, and results of the educational enterprise. Schools, particularly the professionals who staff them, are being held accountable for how much and how well pupils of all types learn. To this has been added that schools contribute more toward the amelioration of the great social problems of our times. It may spell the demise of the questionable tradition that high academic standards demand high rates of failure. Accountability seeks to put the focus on successful outcomes rather than failures or dropouts. In this sense the inability of the student to learn is a failure of the system to deliver desired educational outcomes. Resources are consumed, but where failure predominates there is an unfavorable relationship between inputs and outputs.

More money may not be the final answer. Money represents potential. It is what you do with it that counts. Accountability is perceived as a way to challenge educational administrators to demonstrate that they have, indeed, channeled money into its most productive and most promising educational uses.

Accountability Defined:
People bring meanings to terms. The more popular an idea, the greater the number of individual interpretations attached to it. In the context of this presentation, accountability is defined as a system of delivering desired educational outputs wherein it is specified that every person (or group) is answerable (or responsible), to some degree, to another person (or position, agency) for something, expressed in terms of performance levels (or results, achievement), to be realized within certain constraints (such as specific time period or within stated financial limits). Accountability is a goal-referenced term. It begs the "for what?" question. that is, what educational or other outputs are to be delivered to whom? An accountability is so designed that it is possible to identify who is held responsible for the accomplishment of predetermined objectives. It cannot operate in a meaningful way if there are goal-conflicts (that is, where the people of the community can't agree on what should be the outcomes of the educational system), or if constraints are ignored (that is, the demands are unrealistic for more is expected than can be achieved with the resources allocated to get the job done).

In addition to teachers and administrators the "who" to be held accountable could be:

*a learner or group of learners
*a parent or group of parents
*a community, school district, state, or nation
*a board of education

Educational personnel have become overly defensive in some instances or wrongfully assumed that only the professional employees of the system are accountable for the products that come out of the system. They do play a major role and cannot shirk their responsibilities. Nonetheless, education is a complex and integrated social system with varied goals. Taxpayers, parents, responsible citizens, and learners

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are involved. If one part of the educational enterprise fails to deliver what can rightfully be expected another may be handicapped or unable to satisfy accountability demands. More than likely joint accountability, rather than individual accountability, will prevail in most undertakings. The issue is not to point a finger of blame or to lay the basis for rationalization of a lack of productivity, but to realize the complexity and need for integration of accountability demands.

"Accountability for "what" is not any simpler. It could be:

*to satisfy community or societal expectations
*to provide resources essential for the survival and/or quality of educational services
*to meet individual learning needs
*to provide the quality of teaching service that will produce the desired learning outcomes
*to utilize resources in a most prudent fashion
*to achieve objectives in a professional and ethical manner

This list could go on and on. The point being made is that alternatives cannot be generated until each "who" knows what he is held to account for.

The constraints, or special conditions, that may influence accountability could include the educational technology available, the state of the state of the psychometric art, the availability of special talent to implement specific instructional strategies as well as the resources actually allocated for education.

Accountability today is a complex concept. The potentialities for generating disagreements as to who is to be responsible for what boggles the mind. It is a means to an end. Its fundamental purpose, from my point of view, is to enhance the productivity of the educational enterprise by maximizing the relevance of its programs, minimizing the failure to deliver desired outcomes, and optimizing the relationships between resources--human, physical, and fiscal--and results. Within an accountability system each individual and unit in the educational institution has more definitive information on what is expected, how more prudent resource allocations can be made, and what are the more productive resource utilization practices to be pursued. Better information on performance related to achievement of objectives should also result. This is a tall order.

Alternative Approaches:

Agreeing on what is meant by educational accountability is the initial and not terminal step in the identification of alternatives and operation of such a system. Two major classifications are postulated for the alternatives to satisfying educational accountability demands. The first cluster or category may be identified as alternatives which, by and large, are external to the existing educational systems. The second category includes alternatives which call for internal changes or modifications within established institutions to enable them to better cope with accountability demands.

Education is a very sensitive social institution. It is this closeness that people feel toward the institution that works so long and hard with its children and youths that may be responsible in large part for there being no long periods in the history of all nations when there were no critics of the established educational systems. Progressive education was a protest against the "narrowness, formalism, and inequities of late 19th century schools, "according to Dr. Lawrence Cremin, which "began around 1890, peaked in the 1920s and 1930s, and then collapsed in the years after World War II." Its alternatives to existing programs included the "child-centered," "social-reform,"

and "scientific thrusts" which did generate significant changes within the established system. Many critics of the 1960s and 1970s, in contrast, called for alternatives outside the existing framework. There is the radical extreme typified by Ivan Illich with his recommendation that society be "deschooled," or there be an elimination of formal educational institutions. Illich's proposal, while widely read, attracts few adherents for many reasons. It is a vaguely defined alternative at best and children and youths from disadvantaged backgrounds would stand to lose the most. At the other end of the spectrum are those who call for the creation of "alternative" schools. Some argue that private schools have always been around as alternatives to the public schools. This semantic problem can be alleviated by identifying this group as the "new" alternatives even though some may question whether there is anything really new in what such alternative schools propose.

Illich aside, the critics of the established order are the proponents of a new set of formal educational institutions and thus adopt the competitive conceptualization of accountability. They argue that if the established public school system had competition in the form of alternative or "free" schools, the public schools would be forced to change or face extinction. There must first be created an operational set of the so-called "free" schools. The directory of "free" schools lists 350 such institutions and may be the best indication of the number of so-called options in actual operation.

Parents and students would have a real choice in what set of education opportunities shall be pursued if there were created another mechanism called the voucher system of educational finance. Nonpublic schools have no access to tax funds and depend on tuition in large part. The voucher plan would literally give parents who desire their offspring to attend nonpublic schools access to public or tax funds. For each child of school age the parent would be given a voucher (a pledge of local, state, and federal tax money) equivalent to the cost of educating the child for one year. With voucher in hand the parent could realistically ponder whether his offspring should attend the established public school A or the alternative ("free") school B. Limited if any financial burden would accrue to the parent for the voucher (which could be a local, state, and federal promise to pay educational costs) could be awarded to the winning school. In short, the school could be held directly accountable to parents and their offsprings for the quality of program offered.

This seemingly simple alternative in educational accountability overlooks some operational factors. Implicit is the assumption that the parent and learner, as consumers of education, can make complex evaluations of comprehensive educational institutions, even though this challenge presently perplexes the experienced professional and the educational evaluation exrert. Such advocates assume, furthermore, that the consumer would be willing to switch his offspring from one school to another as often as he buys a new car. Subjective, incomplete, and emotionally charged rather than rational evaluations are more likely to prevail among nonprofessionals who have a limited understanding of the art and science of evaluation. An almost impossible demand is placed on the consumer when he is expected to separate the charlatan from the competent, both of whom offer difficult-to-measure instructional services in a complex social institution. Nonetheless, voucher advocates would have the basic support for educational institutions, public or private, rest on the individual consumer's determination of where to place his resources for education.

Of no less importance is the fact that education is better perceived as a class of social goods which benefits all society rather than as strictly an individual consumption good for the benefit only of individual students and/or their parents. The nation as a whole, as well as the individual child, would suffer from impossible choices poorly executed by ill-informed parents. The market mechanism may not be the best means for determining the level of adequate support for activities related to social goals. One reason for public support of certain social institutions

is that wise choices do not always come from individual consumers who are ill-equipped to make complex decisions alone. The voucher advocates have latched onto accountability and, in my opinion, have made claims for competitive accountability for which there is no basis in fact or experience. There is a distinct possibility that this poorly conceived alternative of educational finance could destroy the great public school system of this nation rather than enhance its accountability, and end a major unifying force in a society presently confronted by many divisive forces.

Better schools with more relevant programs and an improved record of learning successes are more likely to result from research on the nature of learning and the learner rather than from subjective and incomplete evaluation of schools. Improved health and medical practices do not result from cutthroat competition among medical practioners or hospitals.

Cremin noted that the so-called alternative school or "free" school movement was "notoriously a-theoretical and a-historical" in character. He argued that they "produced no John Dewey," no Boyd Bode, no George Counts, no journal even approaching the quality of the old Social Frontier." One is impressed by the negativism of the recent crop of critics, the inability of the Holts, Kozols, Illichs, et al to design viable educational programs as replacements for what they criticize, and the dismal record of the short-lived street academies, "free" schools, or so-called "open" schools which promised more than they could deliver. They are better characterized as voices of protest rather than pioneers in educational reform with alternative accountability models. They are rich in rhetoric but poor in the pragmatic and relatively long lasting recommendations to overcome the shortcoming identified. Their service is to dramatize what must be attacked as serious deficiencies rather than design the educational system of tomorrow. Their journalistic skills far exceed their education know-how.

The history of education documents the fact that established school systems have been changed substantially by the many and periodic reform efforts. The movement called progressive education has been dead for about 25 years. Cremin cites the usual reason for its demise as "internal factionalism," "erosion of political support," "the rise of an articulate opposition associated with post-World War II conservatism" and "ideological inflexibility." Nonetheless, the creative designs of the great minds of progressive education such as John Dewey, Boyd Bode, Francis W. Parker, and Helen Parkhust, to mention but a few, left an indelible impact on the nation's educational system. The schools of today are dramatically different from their counterparts in the days before John Dewey.

Modifications within the established institutions hold by far and away the most promising alternatives to influence the personal and educational development of the largest number of learners. The set of such alternatives for achieving greater educational accountability would include:

1. The implementation of outcomes-oriented management systems. These include MBO/A and PPBS, to mention the most popular today, which give administrators the capability to ascertain what impact additional resources may have on the outcomes of a given program. This mode of operation calls for specification of what the organization is trying to do (generation of objectives), identification of alternative strategies for the attainment of objectives (programming), analysis of assessment of the costs and effectiveness of each alternative or strategy to an objective, the implementation of rational decision making in the selection of a course of action to be pursued, and objective evaluation of the consequences of pursuing an alternative. There is a body of literature and some practical experiences to make outcome-oriented management systems viable options now.

2. The implementation of outcomes-oriented instructional systems.
Such systems call for the generation and use of performance objectives in the design and execution of learning strategies and appraisal of learning outcomes. The instructional system influences the manner in which the staff is deployed, alternative instructional strategies are employed, and instructional organization is patterned.

3. Greater utilization of instructional resources available in the private sector.
What is called "performance contracting" is better viewed as contracting with a special resource with unique capabilities in instruction that is presently in the private sector. Contrary to common belief, neither performance contracting, nor any other single technique, brought accountability into being in education for the first time. Every accountability system demands clarification of whether personnel will be responsible for the execution of a process or for the development or achievement of a product. Thus, teachers may be held accountable for "teaching"--execution of an instructional process or activity with so many pupils in so many classes per day over so many months in a school year. The traditional teaching contract is a "performance" contract, but teachers are asked to render services. The teaching "contract"--like those with a physician, lawyer, architect, or TV repairman--calls for performance of stated functions over a given period of time. There usually is no guarantee that specific learning outcomes will indeed be attained or the contractor will receive reduced or no pay.

Teachers may be held accountable for results as well; that is, for pupils' learning up to a previously-specified level. This is accountability for a product or outcomes and not simply for performance of a process. The so-called "performance contract" in education is in reality a variable payment contract for the fulfillment of instructional outcomes. Payments are not fixed but related to the outcome levels satisfied. Clearly, then, the so-called "performance contract" is not an effort to bring accountability into education for the first time so much as it is an effort to switch the focus from accountability for instructional inputs and processes, called teaching services, to accountability for instructional outcomes.

Recent appraisals suggest that the "performance contractors" from the private sector promised more than they could deliver and thus were judged to have flunked in the Office of Education experiments. Nonetheless, by focusing on a more limited range of learning targets and recognizing the limitations of any given instructional strategy, contractors in the private sector could team-up with teaching resources in the public sector to form an exciting alternative. Most vendors of products useful in instruction now consider performance contracting to be risky, confining, and generally an undesirable way to do business. It need not remain that way.

4. Continuing the search for and experimentation with alternative public school programs.

There can be educational options within as well as outside the established school system. There are presently many well publicized options for public education. More are needed. The spirit of giving well conceptualized and carefully implemented program alternatives a chance in more schools is consistent with the drive for increasing the delivery capabilities of existing school systems. Alternative programs should be held accountable for results as well as traditional ones. The goal is improvement and not simply change for the sake of change.

5. Implementing an educational auditing system.
The educational (or instructional) information audit is one of the key concepts in

the operation of an educational accountability system. To receive and review frequent reports on progress to date from those with delegated tasks is the beginning and not the end of information gathering. To avoid what can be called the "unverified information trap," the prudent administrator must include within his accountability network an educational audit dimension to verify the authenticity of perceptions submitted. An audit, in general, can be defined as a systematic investigation, verification, and critical review of not only financial expenditures but of any aspect of the organization, such as goals determination, operations, and resource utilization patterns. It substantiates progress (or lack of it) toward achieving goals and verifies other data available; it is one of the culminating steps in the control and feedback process. Through the independent audit--carried out by both internal and external agencies or personnel, independent of the person completing the task--the accuracy, integrity and authenticity of previous reports and documents can be ascertained. There are many kinds of audits, such as the pre-audit (verification that the authority and resources exist to do something before a decision is made to do it)and the post-audit (verification after the fact, not before it). Independent external audits occur less frequently than in-house audits by someone of the superintendent's staff.

6. Designing and operating a total staff evaluations system.
This includes specification of effectiveness models, performance indicators, instruments to gather performance data, and decision points for the interpretation of evaluative data. The total appraisal system calls personnel, program, and resource use evaluation. Every system of accountability has a day of reckoning--a time for appraising how well objectives were satisfied, stewardship over resources was discharged, and/or delegated tasks were fulfilled. There is no avoiding this Judgment Day, even though it makes the "judged" uneasy. By the same token, those evaluated have a right to know how their performances will be monitored, what standards will be applied, when periodic evaluations will occur, what rewards or penalties are in store, and what feedback they can expect on their performance appraisals. Approximately ten states now have professional staff evaluation laws and many of these are considered to be "opening the door to accountability." Such mandated appraisal couched in unworkable language or which fails to recognize how schools work are not likely to succeed. The Stull Bill in California which focused in part on a statewide teacher evaluation has failed to deliver on its intentions.

7. Reporting on educational outcomes.
The communications links between large educational enterprises and the publics they serve are difficult to design and maintain. Accountability demands keeping the public informed as to how well (or poorly) schools are meeting public expectations.

To Summarize:
Accountability is a tricky term which has captured the imagination of many. People who seek to establish greater accountability among schools do not all subscribe to the same beliefs. They range from those who see accountability as a way to stem the tide of increasing education expenditures, to the critics of education who see accountability as a way to pin the blame on someone for shortcomings, to proponents of public finance of private institutions through the voucher plan. The so-called "accountability" legislation varies considerably from state to state. This legislation as of the Fall of 1973, included recommendations on the use of: PPBS in 10 states, management information systems in 2 states, and uniform accounting systems in 5 states. The laws in 21 states, the largest single block, linked accountability with state testing or assessment. The "accountability" legislation in 10 states focused on mandated professional personnel evaluation programs. Only one state law focused on performance contracting as part of its accountability efforts. Whatever the reasons, the forces triggering the cry for greater educational accountability are not to be denied--they are more likely to increase rather than decrease in intensity.

Accountability puts the stress on performance in the achievement of objectives rather than processes or inputs alone. It is a system which recognizes that while money helps, it isn't everything. For the purposes of this paper, accountability is conceptualized in operational terms as a system for improving the delivery of educational outcomes which clarifies who is answerable to whom, for what, when, and within what constraints.

The competitive conceptualization of accountability would call for the creation of alternative or "free" schools outside the established system and supported through a voucher system. The proponents of such an approach are more adept at dramatizing shortcoming than designing viable options.

Modifications within established institutions hold by far and away the most promising alternatives to influence the educational growth of the largest numbers. A comprehensive accountability strategy would include: identification and clarification of objectives, creation of an accountability team, development of output-oriented management systems, implementation of outcomes-oriented instructional systems, greater utilization of instructional resources in the private sector, continuing the search for and experimentation with alternative public school programs, creation of an educational auditing approach, design and operation of a total evaluation system, and more effective reporting on school achievements. Accountability is a team effort even though the chief school executive bears a heavy burden.

Implementation of some promising alternatives within established school systems is more likely to have a significant impact than those efforts which focus on the financing of the so-called "free" schools which to date have been short-lived and unable to operationalize their protests into meaningful learning experiences.

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